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TO: House Committee on Higher Education
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REGARDING: Request for Information, Interim Charge #4

Interim Charge 4:

Study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and degrees versus more traditional programs.

1. What are the existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty? What have institutions done to alleviate and eliminate these barriers?

Faculty and student barriers to online learning existed prior to the pandemic but were exacerbated by the speed with which colleges had to transition all instruction to the format. As a technical school, Texas State Technical College (TSTC) also faced the challenge of fulfilling the hands-on training requirements for technical coursework.

Barriers to online learning for students include, but are not limited to:

- **A lack of knowledge regarding online learning expectations and preparedness.**
- **A lack of access to technology, internet access, and equipment – especially true for students who did not originally register for online courses but were transitioned to the online environment as a response to the pandemic.**
- **Adaptation to online and hybrid modality to achieve course outcomes – especially true at TSTC where most of the student population attend specifically for the in-person, hands-on learning experiences provided.**

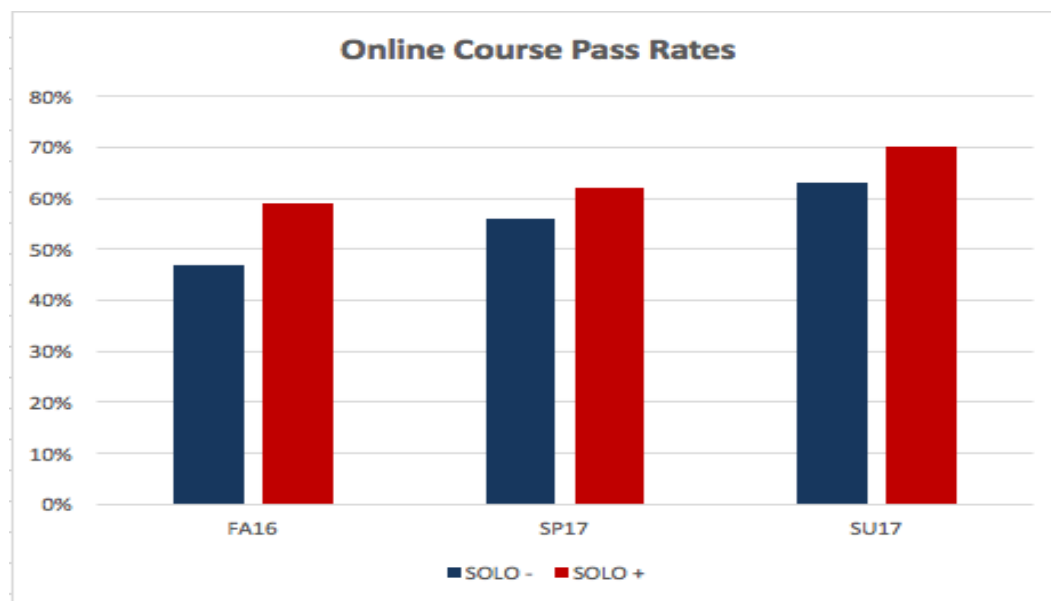
Barriers to online learning for faculty include, but are not limited to: Fear of losing engagement with students and insufficient experience to include this component within their online courses.

- A lack of understanding the pedagogy behind online learning that leads to resistance in implementing best practices for online course development and delivery – especially true at technical colleges where faculty are hired because of their technical and/or industry experience. These individuals, first, had to learn the pedagogy behind higher education instruction. Now, due to COVID, they must also learn online instruction.

Barriers that impact both faculty and students include, but are not limited to:

- Limited proficiency with technology aimed at higher education instruction.
- Access to appropriately designed instruction dependent on equipment and skills that are difficult to replicate outside of the hands-on lab setting.

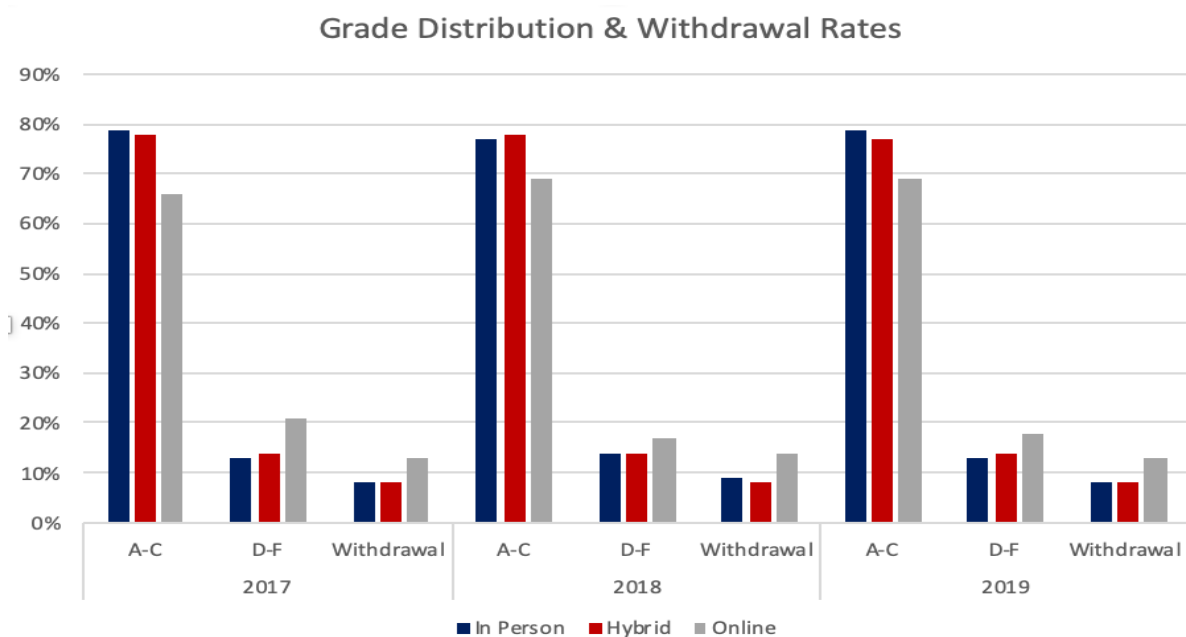
TSTC has addressed online learning faculty and student barriers to varying degrees. To better prepare students for online learning courses, many institutions, including TSTC have implemented an online learning orientation. This strategy can help students to become more aware of expectations and the online learning environment, as well as introduce them to available support. The Student Online Learning Orientation (SOLO) implemented at TSTC has proven to have a positive impact on student success rates in online courses. Prior to implementation of the SOLO, pass rates in online learning courses averaged 53 percent and withdrawal rates had reached as high as 21 percent. See [*Flying SOLO for Student Success*](#).



TSTC assisted faculty with course guidelines and training opportunities for online course development, best practices, and quality assurance. However, learning the new guidelines and participating in the additional training while developing and delivering online courses has been an extra burden on faculty and, in some cases, has led to faculty overload and burn-out. TSTC has also implemented an instructional design team to work with faculty to implement technology, simulations, and assessments for the online environment, as well as to utilize a hybrid instructional model that combines online learning with hands-on labs and skills assessments.

2. What information and data is available regarding long-term student success for those taking courses primarily online -- both in general and specific to Texas institutions?

Success and persistence data in online student populations at TSTC is provided below and is on average with data reported by institutions with a 5 to 10 percent decrease in success rates and 5 to 10 percent increase in withdrawal rates (decreased persistence).



3. With institutions having shifted instruction to online-only in the Spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, what lessons have been learned?

The following are lessons learned at TSTC that should be built upon:

- **Have an instructional continuity plan in place that can be utilized during any situation which necessitates limited access to a campus for instruction.**

- Have mechanisms in place to meet online student support and accessibility needs.
- Ensure that all faculty have an online presence and are trained on functions in the College's learning management system (LMS), as well as in the best practices in online course delivery.
- Require individuals in each of the College's programs to work with instructional designers to develop online content to be utilized by all faculty in the program.
- Assess all the College's courses to determine what content can effectively be delivered in a hybrid or online modality and make the necessary investment to ensure that transitioned content is engaging and meets quality control standards.

4. What are the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility, or other considerations? The committee is seeking the perspectives of college/university administration, faculty, and students.

There are definite challenges in these areas compounded by the quick shift to online instruction as a response to the pandemic. Specifically, the challenges related to each area include the following:

Technology

- The lack of technology and dependable internet access for TSTC's faculty and students was a challenge.
 - TSTC struggled with having technology for staff to work remotely (laptops and internet access). With CARES Act funding, TSTC was able to help many students purchase a laptop and assist them with locating a free or low-cost internet provider.
 - Access to necessary hardware and software was also difficult for TSTC – especially for those technical programs that utilize expensive software typically only available in campus computer labs and requiring a robust computer to operate (i.e. AutoCad and SolidWorks).
- TSTC's Information Technology Department had to look for and quickly implement new communication methods and solutions for e-payment, faxing, bookstore e-commerce, disability services, and scaling up cloud-based learning and enrollment functions.

Quality

- Courses had to be converted quickly but still meet the distance learning best practice standards of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges – as well as the TSTC online quality assurance rubric.

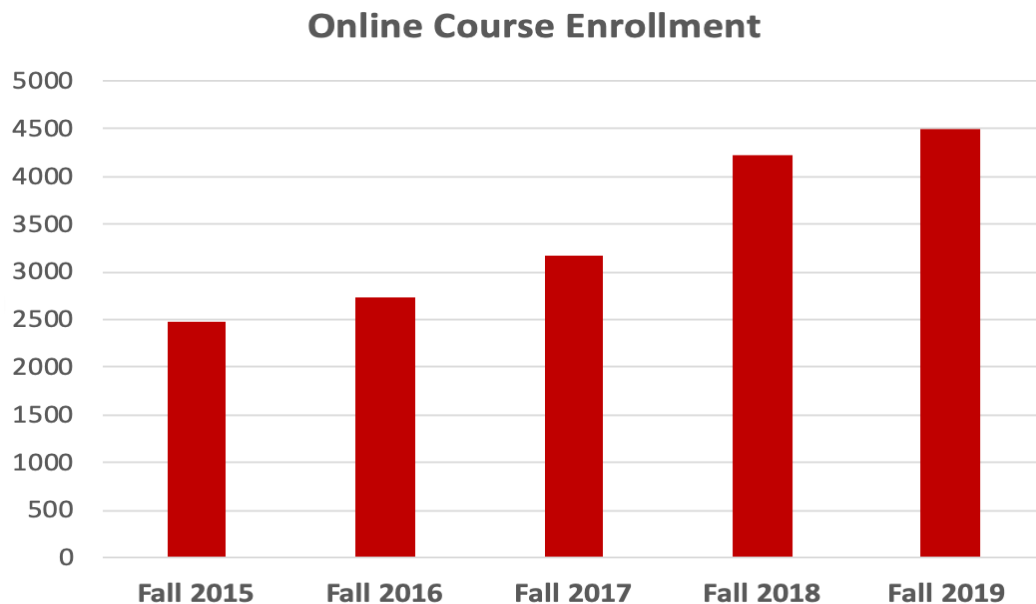
- There is a need for resources to ensure long-term quality of transitioned online courses.

Accessibility

- TSTC identified a lack of training related to universal design needed to make courses accessible to all students.
- TSTC also found there was a lack of technology to provide accessibility services to the online/remote student population (sign language interpretation, captioning services, etc.).

5. Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?

The shift to online courses will lead to increased capacity. TSTC's plans are to increase its number of online programs from 4 to 19. This will open opportunities for students statewide to complete degrees not available in-person at a student's home campus. Per current online enrollment trends at TSTC, increased demand should continue to rise.



6. How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access?

Throughout the TSTC system, two different issues are apparent. In East and West Texas, students report issues addressing the lack of internet reliability and speed. South Texas

students cite issues with the cost of obtaining reliable internet services. In order to assist students, TSTC has had to reopen its Learning Resource Centers on an appointment basis so that students have access to a reliable internet to complete assignments.

7. What sort of differences in quality are we seeing for online nursing programs without a clinical component versus those that do have one or are done in person?

Clinical learning is foundational to the core learning experience of nursing education. Most employers would be resistant to hiring a graduate from nursing school who does not have clinical learning with real patients. Clinical access began to resume for TSTC nursing students after May 4th, 2020; however, not all clinical sites are accessible at this time. The Nursing Program at TSTC maintains ongoing collaboration with clinical partners in order to facilitate students' success in completion of face-to-face clinical hours.

8. What sort of privacy exists for students utilizing some of the more popular online curriculum packages?

Courses that use third-party curriculum packages are required to provide links to privacy policies that inform students about the degree to which their data (identities, submissions, logons) can be monitored, collected, and distributed either by the external tool through registration or participation in any of its activities.

9. Has recently adopted legislation on Open Educational Resources been able to make an impact on the quality of online education yet?

Not Applicable

10. Do small and rural community colleges have the financial capability to switch to online, as well as in-person, classes, degrees, etc.?

Not Applicable

11. How does the impact of COVID-19 affect the small and rural community college's ability to offer online classes and make other changes to adapt to the pandemic?

Not Applicable